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ABSTRACT

Based on previous research on the influence of community context on the needs and concerns of first year teachers and on the implementation of induction program components, this study sought to determine the effects of the community context on the lives of beginning teachers as related to their teaching experience in the classroom. Data were analyzed from studies of 53 beginning teachers located in six sites with a wide range of contextual characteristics. (Community variables included urban versus rural, socioeconomic status ranges of students, and per pupil expenditures.) The sites were in Illinois, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, and West Virginia. Three subjects from each site (N=18) supplied additional information via interviews conducted at the beginning of the school year and after the winter break. The interview questions focused on what characteristic of the school or community made teaching particularly easy or difficult and in what ways teaching and students had been similar to or different from individual expectations. Findings offer profiles of the communities where the beginning teachers work, an understanding of the teachers, and evidence of the impact of community context on the teachers' classroom lives. Background information on the 53 teachers is presented in tables and references are included. (JD)

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The Impact of Context on the Classroom Lives of Beginning Teachers

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The Impact of Context on the Classroom Lives of Beginning Teachers

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Griffin (1985), in his review of research on induction, concluded that the bulk of the research is of a descriptive nature. A plethora of studies contribute positively to our understanding of the needs and concerns of beginning teachers (Huling-Austin, Barnes & Smith 1985; and Ryan, 1970). While these types of descriptive studies are essential for providing a bedrock of data, studies concerning other variables which may impact the induction process are also needed. For example, Zeichner (1982) points out that attempts to influence the performance of beginning teachers should recognize the importance of the conditions of the workplace. However, only a few induction studies investigate the influence of the contexts in which beginning teachers function.

Recently Stiegelbauer (1986), targeting this critical contextual question, assessed the impact of cross cultural settings on new teachers. Her findings suggested that social and cultural variables tended not to impact new teachers in the initial months of their careers. Rather, the variables identifed by Veenman's (1984) review of the induction

literature such as classroom discipline and motivating students seemed, initially, to be more critical than the community or school context. It was hypothesized that community context would begin to impact beginning teachers as "survival" became less of an issue. This does not suggest that the same patterns would be associated with the impact of school or classroom context on beginning teachers.

Metamorphosis of the Study

The interest for this study grew from the rich history of commitment to induction research at the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education (R&DCTE) at the University of Texas. Particularly from work done by the Model Teacher Induction Project (MTIP) Satellite Network.

The MTIP Satellite Network evolved from work done by MTIP. The MTIP was a research-based induction program developed by R&DCTE and field-tested during the 1984-1985 school year. In conjunction with the MTIP, R&DCTE in 1984 organized and coordinated a national teacher induction network known as the MTIP Satellite Network. The network also had a formal arrangement with the ATE Commission on the Induction Process. All Commission members had become members of the network.

From two national conferences devoted to the topic of teacher induction hosted by R&DCTE, an interest in a collaborative research project on teacher induction

developed. In June 1985 a group met at R&DCTE to organize the project. Duties of the group included: finalization of research questions and instruments and the creation of a master schedule for data collection. Besides participating in the collection of a core data set, research sites were provided the option of also collecting an expanded data set. Expanded data collection included interviews, three times during the school year, with a minimum of three beginning teachers participating in the core data collection.

Methodology

It needs to be clearly understood that this report targets community contextual factors and not the impact of the school context. A discussion of the influence of school context is examined in another paper (Huling-Austin & Murphy, 1987). Among the major research questions that guided the collaborative effort was one that pertained particularly to the data analysis for this report: What influence does context have on needs/concerns of First Year Teachers and on the implementation of various induction program components? More specifically, based on the cited research and other similar findings, this study sought to determine the effects of the community context on beginning teachers and particularly its influence on their lives as related to teaching. If, as previous studies suggest, community context does not initially impact beginning teachers, it was also of

interest to determine when these influences become prominent.

The subset of data analyzed for this report came from a data base of over 30 sites and 500 beginning teachers participating in the study. The sites included in the analysis were selected primarily because they completed the optional expanded data collection. Data were analyzed from 53 beginning teachers located in 6 sites across the United States. The sites included in the analyses encompassed a wide range of contextual characteristics. School locations ranged from large cites to rural areas. Other variables such as SES and per pupil expenditure varied from low to high. The analyses also included demographic data about each school district, background information about the 53 beginning teachers, and interviews conducted at the beginning of the school year and after the winter break with a subset of the beginning teachers.

The interview questions served as the core of the analysis. Three subjects from each site were included in this analysis for a total of 18 beginning teachers. Two questions were of particular interest: 1) What, if anything, about this school or community makes your teaching particularly easy or difficult? and 2) In what ways has teaching been similar to or different from what you expected? Are your students as you expected? Responses to other questions were also explored for data relating to the impact of the context.

The comments from these two questions were categorized for both the beginning of the year and the winter break interviews. A classification system for the comments was allowed to emerge from the data within the general framework of either relating to the community context such as cultural differences, parental involvement, and SES of the community or not relating to the context. The comments relating to the community context were then classified as either positive or negative. Finally, the demographic characteristics of each site were checked with the classifications to ascertain if the comments of the beginning teachers matched actual conditions existing at the site. Analyses were completed for both interview periods. Additionally, interviews conducted at the end of the school year at 3 of the sites became available and were included in the analysis for a total of 45 interviews.

Findings

The findings will be presented as follows: District/System Information, Beginning Teacher Background Information, and Analysis of Interviews. This order presents a picture of the community in which the beginning teachers work, an understanding of the teachers themselves, and finally evidence of the impact or lack of impact of community context on the classroom lives of the teachers.

District/System Information

Each participant researcher in the collaborative study completed a detailed questionnaire about each school district or system that employed beginning teachers participating in the study. Because of this, some sites contain more than one summary.

ILLINOIS. This site contained three different school districts, A, B, and C. District A was located in a rural area. There were 7 schools in the district housing 2200 students and 128 teachers. The district spent $2127 on each student. The students scored above the national average on standardized tests. The majority of students (50%) came from families identified as having middle class SES. Only 15% of the families were identified as coming from lower middle or lower SES backgrounds. Student mobility was reported as being low. All of the teachers in the district were identified as Anglo.

School district B was also in a rural setting. This district contained 6 schools housing 1696 students and 129 teachers. The per pupil expenditure was $2049. Student achievement was reported as approximately equal to national norms. This district reported 40% of the families having a SES identified as lower middle to lower. Thirty percent reported SES of middle and another 30% reported as upper middle to upper. Student mobility was average. In this district 100% of the teachers identified their ethnic orgins

as Anglo.

School district C, also in a rural setting, was composed of 5 schools serving 1940 students and 105 teachers. The per pupil expenditure was reported as $1900. Student achievement was higher than the national norms. Fifty percent of the families in the district were identified as having a middle class SES. Forty percent of the families had an SES of lower middle to lower class. Student mobility was low. This district also reported 100% of the teachers as being Anglo.

KENTUCKY. The district in this state was located in a suburban area. The district contained 50 schools assisting 30,331 students and 1386 teachers. The per pupil expenditure was $2300. Student achievement was reported as being higher than the national norm. Fifty-five percent of families in the district were identified as having a SES of upper middle class. Middle class SES was claimed by 18% and lower middle to lower SES contained 37% of the district's families. Student mobility was average. Ethnic background revealed 78% of the teachers were Anglo, 21% black, and 1% Asian.

NORTH CAROLINA. The district at this site was located in a large city with 103 schools housing 72,000 students and 4000 teachers. Per pupil expenditure was not reported. Student achievement was reported as higher than national norms. SES was reported as 50% in the middle bracket and 25% in both upper middle to upper and lower

middle to lower. Student mobility was average. The ethnic composition of teachers was reported as 90% Anglo, 5% Black, 1% Asian, and 4% other.

OREGON. This site contained 3 districts known as A, B, and C. School district A drew 50% of its students from suburban areas and 50% from rural areas. The district had 8 schools with 3859 students and 245 teachers. Per pupil expenditure was $3618. Student achievement was higher than the national average. SES was reported as: 52% upper middle to upper, 30% middle, and 18% lower middle to lower. Student mobility was low. The ethnic representation of teachers was 97% Anglo, 2% Asian, and 1% Hispanic.

School district B, located in a suburban area, had 7 schools serving 3245 students and 212 teachers. Per pupil expenditure, the lowest reported in this data analysis, was $1600. Student achievement was higher than national averages. SES for the district's families was reported as 50% middle, 40% lower middle to lower, and 10% upper middle. Student mobility was average. Ethnic composition of the teachers was 96% Anglo, 2% Asian, 1% Black, and 5% Hispanic.

School district C was located in a rural area. The district, the smallest in this analysis, had 3 schools with 915 students and 50 teachers. The per pupil expenditure was $3100, the second highest in this report. Student achievement was higher than the national norm. SES was reported as 60% middle, 30% lower middle, and 10% upper

the subject area for which they were certified. In fact, all the beginning teachers in the study are certified teachers. No one was issued any type of "emergency" certification.

Analysis of Interviews

Three beginning teachers from each of the six sites were included in this analysis for a total N of 18. The two original interview questions, stated earlier in this paper, were broken down into three specific items. Additionally, a fourth question from the interviews was included in the analysis because it uncovered data related to the impact of community context on beginning teachers. The four items that formed the basis for the analysis were: (1) Is there anything about this school or community that makes teaching particularly easy or particularly difficult? (2) Is teaching similar to or different from what you expected? (3) Are your students as you expected? and (4) What concerns you the most at this time? Each response to the item was tallied along with whether or not the statement referred to the community in a positive or negative manner. Some subjects answered items in such a manner that tallies were entered in more than one category. This accounts for the discrepancy in total responses for each item.

There were two interviews. Interview #1 took place within the first two weeks of the school year. Interview #2 took place within two weeks after the winter break. Three of

middle. Student mobility was rated average. The ethnic composition of teachers was 100% Anglo.

TEXAS. The district, located in a mid-sized city, had 14 schools housing 10,846 students and 591 teachers. Per pupil expenditure was $2740. Student achievement was equal to national norms. SES of families was reported as 50% middle, 28% upper middle to upper, and 22% lower middle to lower. Student mobility was ranked as average. The ethnic composition of the district's teachers was 84% Anglo, 8% Black, and 8% Hispanic.

WEST VIRGINIA. Located in a mid-sized city, this district had 18 schools enrolling 7220 students and employing 490 teachers. Per pupil expenditure was $2600. SES was reported as 57% middle, and 21% each for upper middle to upper and lower middle to lower. Student mobility was low. Anglo teachers composed 94% of the staff and Blacks composed 6% of the staff.

Beginning Teacher Background Information

Table 1 shows the statistics for each reporting site. Some information does stand out clearly. Almost 2/3 of the teachers are female. The clear majority of beginning teachers have a bachelors degree and are recently graduated from college. They are primarily Anglo and the only ethnic minority represented are Blacks. Almost all of the beginning teachers completed student teaching and most are teaching in

the sites also provided interview data from a third interview which occurred within the final two weeks of the school year. Even though Interview #3 does not contain complete data, findings are reported.

The analysis is reported for the entire group of 18 beginning teachers rather than by school district because no similar response patterns were determined within districts. Information about each of the four questions is reported separately.

ITEM #1 - INTERVIEW #1. A clear pattern emerged in the analysis of this item. During Interview #1 15 comments were recorded about the community or school making teaching easy and 7 comments were recorded about teaching being difficult. Thirteen of the comments about the community/school making teaching easy, directly addressed community variables. Three comments concerned growing up in the community and being familiar with families and the schools. Eight comments were about an expectation of parental support. The other 2 comments related to the SES of the students and/or families.

Of the 7 comments about the community/school making teaching more difficult, 3 did not address community variables. Two dealt with problems growing up in the community and knowing people "too well." One comment dealt with SES and the other with a concern about excessive

parental pressure on students.

It is interesting to note that at this time of the year, some of the information about the community appears to be based on hearsay rather than direct experience. For example, beginning teachers prefaced their statements with the following comments:

"From what I've heard"

"I've been told"

"A lot of teachers say."

ITEM 1 - INTERVIEW #2. This interview, conducted within two weeks after the winter break, shows a clear swing in the ratio of easy to difficult comments. In Interview #1 the responses were 2-1 that the community/school made teaching easy. However, in this interview 12 comments were made about the ease of teaching and 11 comments about the difficulty in teaching. Of the comments about the difficulty of teaching all but two were directly related to community context. Three comments discuss the negative aspects of teaching in a community where the person also went to school. Three comments describe the frustration of trying to have parents become involved with students' educational program. Four statements comment about various things related to SES. One subject stated that it was "difficult to get parents involved because several of my students don't even have phones in their own homes." At the other end of the continuum, another beginning teacher noted that middle and

higher "class" students are difficult to motivate because "they are used to sort of an easy life."

ITEM 1 - INTERVIEW #3. By the time this interview was conducted, during the last two weeks of school, beginning teachers' perceptions about the effects of community/school on their teaching were more similar to those stated during Interview #1 than Interview #2. That is, by a 3-1 margin, more teachers felt the community made teaching easier. The teachers commenting about the difficulty of teaching identified school rather than community variables as impacting their classroom lives.

ITEM 2 - INTERVIEW #1. Six beginning teachers commented that teaching was similar to what they expected and 15 comments were recorded about teaching being different than expected. All the comments related to non-community variables.

ITEM 2 - INTERVIEW #2. By the winter break, 11 comments attested to teaching being similar to what was expected and 10 comments reflected differences in expectations and realities. None of the comments related to community variables.

ITEM 2 - INTERVIEW #3. Again, as in Interview #2, a relatively even distribution of comments was discovered. Five comments spoke about teaching being similar to what was expected and 6 comments discussed differences. None of the

comments related to community variables.

ITEM 3 - INTERVIEW #1. By almost 2-1 (10-6) beginning teachers found their students to not be as expected. Only one comment, related to SES, targeted a community variable.

ITEM 3 - INTERVIEW #2. At this time of the year, the margin had increased to about 4-1 (13-3) for comments about students not being as expected. Three of the comments were related to community variables. Two of the responses concerned students and SES stereotypes: "I knew where the school was located [middle to upper class area] so I knew what to expect [lots of parental concern and students who work hard]." and "Fantastic, a lot better than expected. Of course, there is a difference between the student in the city school and the student in the rural school. I have to deal more with discipline in a rural school." The other response concerned lack of parental support when dealing with problem students.

ITEM 3 - INTERVIEW #3. The 2-1 ratio (5-3) was reestablished during this interview. More beginning teachers (N=5) commented on their students not being as expected. Only one comment related to community variables: "My area is a lower income class area with less parental interference in the classroom, but also less parental pressure on students to do well."

ITEM 4 - INTERVIEW #1, INTERVIEW #2, and INTERVIEW #3. When asked about what concerned them the most in each interview, only 1 beginning teacher responded with an item related to community variables. That comment was made during Interview #2 and the concern was "getting more parents involved in my classroom." Every other concern expressed in the 45 interviews related to non-community variables.

Conclusions

While reading this section, please bear in mind that this paper does not address the issue of the impact of school/classroom context on beginning teachers. Rather, this paper examines only the impact of community context. Since the sites represented varying contexts it was hypothesized that if the community context did impact beginning teachers, an identification of the variables may be possible. However, while the analyses did indicate that, initially, beginning teachers were able to identify a general factor about the community that they perceived may affect their teaching, this context was not found to be a major influence on beginning teachers. In the first interview of the year, one beginning teacher, representative of many others, described her/his knowledge about the community as it may impact her/his teaching, "it's really hearsay." In other words, during the initial two weeks of teaching, anticipation of the context

seemed to impact beginning teachers more than the variables themselves.

The second interview, conducted in the two weeks following the winter break, indicated that, unlike during the initial interview, beginning teachers were now able to identify specific community contextual factors that impacted their teaching, particularly those dealing with parents and issues perceived to be related to SES. This finding seemed to support the hypotheses that the community context has a more powerful impact on beginning teachers after they are able to deal with day-to-day management of the classroom. Yet, because community contextual factors did not emerge from the data generated by ITEM 2 (teaching), it appeared that at this time of the school year context was still not a major influence in the beginning teacher's classroom life. This was further confirmed by the lack of emergence of community variables in ITEM 4 (concerns). Even after winter break, beginning teachers continued to talk more about classroom management issues than community contextual factors as having unexpected impact on their teaching.

The final interview of the year, during the last two weeks, showed a lessening of the impact of variables impinging from community sources. Perhaps with the first-time rush to inventory materials, finalize grades, and the other duties of closing a year of teaching, it was not actually surprising that beginning teachers concentrate once

again on the things immediately pressing rather than turning their attention to things outside of their classrooms.

Recommendations for Induction Programs

These findings seem to offer some insight for persons/organizations considering the use of an induction program to support beginning teachers. While beginning teachers do seem to be aware of community contextual factors that may impact their teaching, the skills Veenman (1984) identified as "survival skills" are foremost in their thoughts. But, as techniques are routinized, community contextual factors, particularly those with a negative impact, do begin to be addressed by beginning teachers. This seems to be reported, for a majority of beginning teachers, by the winter break.

A planner of an induction program may consider offering assistance in dealing with parents, community mores, and other contextual factors, a month or two after the school year has begun. More than likely, dealing with community context earlier in the year would not be as welcome a topic to beginning teachers as one related to "survival." However, topics related to the community context should not be avoided during the entire first year because some aspects of the context, particularly negative factors concerned with dealing with overbearing or absent parents and the impact of SES on students, seem to influence beginning teachers within the

first few months of the initial school year.

TABLE 1

Beginning Teachers' Background Information

(N=53)

		IL	KY	NC	OR	TX	W.VA
SEX	Male	3	5	4	0	1	2
	Female	6	15	7	4	5	1
AGE	21-25	7	15	9	2	6	3
	26-30		3	2	1		
	31-35	1	2		1		
	36-40						
	41-45	1					
ETHNICITY	Anglo	8	20	8	4	6	3
	Asian						
	Black			3			
	Hispanic						
	Other	1					1
CERTIFIED TEACHER?	Yes	9	20	11	4	6	3
	No						
TEACHING IN SUBJ CERTIFIED?	Yes	9	17	10	4	6	3
	No		3	1			

TABLE 1 (cont.)

Beginning Teachers' Background Information

		IL	KY	NC	OR	TX	W.VA
GRADE LEVEL	Primary	4	9	4	1	5	2
	Middle	1	5	7			
	High	4	6		3	1	1
STUDENT TAUGHT?	Yes	9	19	11	4	6	3
	No		1				
WHEN STUDENT TAUGHT?	<2	6	17	10	4	6	3
	3-5	2	1	1			
	5+	1	1				
DEGREE	BA/BS	8	17	11	4	6	3
	Masters	1	2				
	Ph.D.		1				

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